

basics

parsvottanasana

by Natasha Rizopoulos



Lift shoulder heads
away from floor

Reach sternum
away from navel

Square hips

Release back
leg's inner thigh
toward back wall

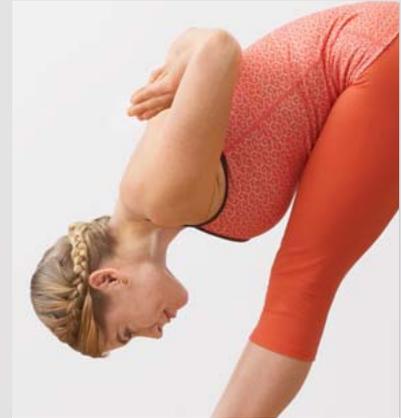
Root down with ball
of front big toe

Double the Fun

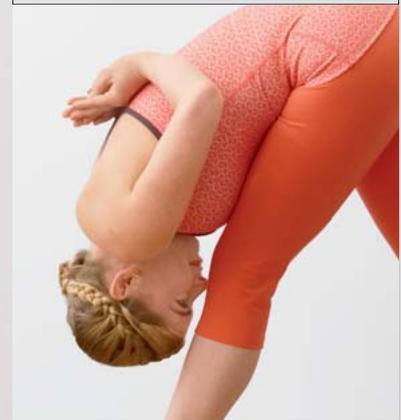
Enjoy the benefits of forward bending and backbending in this standing pose.

PARSVOTTANASANA (Intense Side Stretch) simultaneously stretches the hamstrings and opens the shoulders—two actions that will improve your yoga practice and increase mobility in your daily life. Acumen is required to make progress in both areas, which sometimes seem to be in conflict. When you pursue the forward-bending aspect of the posture (which elongates the hamstrings) with so much enthusiasm that your shoulders round forward and your chest collapses, you've missed an excellent opportunity to increase the range of motion in your shoulders and counteract some postural habits that our increasingly computer- and car-driven lives promote. Although Parsvottanasana contains a forward bend, it's dramatically improved by weaving in an element of backbending: keeping length along the front of your body.

Marrying opposites, of course, is central to the big picture of hatha yoga, often defined as the union between the opposing solar and lunar energies. You also need to find a balance between freedom and stability in Parsvottanasana. The freedom you can find in your upper body as you extend your spine and open your shoulders is very



DO Keep length in the spine.



DON'T Round your back.

Stay grounded through back heel

Press down with outer edge of back foot



much facilitated by the stability of your base and the strength of your legs. As you explore the pose, embrace its dualities. Your physical alignment will improve, and with the liberating effects of embodying opposites, you may experience an energetic alignment as well.

SET YOUR BASE

To begin, stand facing a wall and place your hands on it shoulder-distance apart and at hipbone height. Step your right foot back about 4 feet, placing your left foot about 1½ feet from the wall and reaching your hips back so that your arms and torso are parallel to the floor. Make sure you create a straight line from your hands

to your shoulders to your hips, with your ears in line with your upper arms and your gaze to the floor. Set up with your heels in line with each other, with your front toes pointed forward and your back foot at a 45-degree angle.

Now start to bring the base of the pose into alignment. The goal is to square your hips; this usually involves pulling the front hip back and shifting the other hip forward. To achieve this, press down with the ball of your big toes and engage your quadriceps, drawing your front outer hip back and up and firming it into the midline of your body. Then release your back inner thigh to the wall behind you to roll your back hip forward.

Pose Benefits

- Lengthens the hamstrings
- Strengthens the legs
- Stretches the hips
- Increases the range of motion in the shoulders
- Opens the chest
- Improves balance

Contraindications

- Hamstring tear
- Shoulder or wrist injury

Notice whether your thigh rotation caused your back foot's inner arch to collapse; this is fairly common, but you want to make sure to lift the inner arch so that the outer edge of the foot stays heavy and grounded. Once your hips are even, use the strength of your arms pushing against the wall to lengthen your spine and the sides of your body by pressing your hips into the center of the room (see figure 1).

The asana name Parsvottanasana derives from the Sanskrit words *parsva* (side, or flank) and *uttana* (intense stretch). Remember this as you aim to establish an expansive quality along your torso. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths, then switch sides.

MAKE SPACE

For the next variation, face the center of the room and place one heel against the wall (see figure 2). Use the same stance as in the last round, and square your hips again. Try “scissoring” your inner thighs: Energetically draw them toward each other, which will help create stability in your base. With your next inhalation, take your arms out to the sides and internally rotate the upper arm bones (humeri) in your shoulder sockets so that your palms face the wall behind you.

His daughter
told him
his farm was
for the birds



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Eldon, Wendell, Harlan, and Homer Lundberg

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As you exhale, make gentle fists and bring your knuckles together behind your back just below your shoulder blades. When you do this, your shoulder heads may collapse forward, and your trapezius muscles may tighten up. Rather than reinforce this less-than-ideal position, draw the shoulder heads up and back and externally rotate the upper arms by spinning the inner arm toward the outer arm.

It won't be a dramatic motion, but the action is important for developing the range of motion in your shoulders. Make sure when you do this that there is no pain in your shoulders; if there is, back off slightly so you can ease your way into creating openness.

Take an inhalation, and accentuate the space along and across the front of your body by lifting your sternum (breastbone) away from your navel and spreading your collarbones. With your next exhalation, extend out over your front leg as you keep your hips square and your shoulders drawing up and away from the floor.

Resist the impulse to surrender to gravity, which would cause your shoulders and chest to collapse. Instead, keep your base active by engaging your quadriceps, drawing the inner thighs toward each other, and pressing the back femur (thighbone) firmly toward the wall behind you so that your heel is grounded between the floor and the wall to secure the pose. Let the crown of your head be an extension of the length of your spine, so that your entire neck is long and your gaze is toward your big toe. Hold for 8 to 10 breaths, and then switch sides.

FIND UNION

For the classical version of the pose, move your mat to the center of the room. Stand in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) at the front of the mat, place your hands at your hips, and feel your frontal hipbones pointing straight forward like a pair of headlights. Keeping your hips square, step the right leg back 3½ to 4 feet, and recreate the heel-to-heel alignment from the last rounds. For maximum extension in your spine, take a long stance. To make sure your hips are square, activate your front thigh and draw your outer hip back and

into the midline of your body. Before you shift your other hip forward, however, make sure that your back foot is at a 45-degree angle, which will help protect your knee and align your hips. If the angle of your back foot is too open to the side, the knee gets wrenched when you roll the right hip forward to square it with the left. If, on the other hand, the toes point too far forward, you'll struggle to keep the back heel down and will lose stability.

Now, direct your back inner thigh to the wall behind you so that your hip spins forward. Keep your tailbone heavy so that it anchors you. On an inhalation, take your arms out to the side. As you exhale, rotate your arms and press your palms together behind your back. If you can, point your fingers up in a prayer position. Your shoulders might immediately collapse forward. Externally rotate the upper arms in their sockets, spinning your inner arm toward your outer arm so that your shoulders and chest lift.

With your next inhalation, reach your sternum away from your navel to open your heart. Keep your quadriceps engaged and your hips square. On an exhalation, extend forward without shortening the front of your body. Look toward your left big toe with a gaze that is soft but unwavering. Remain rooted through your feet and legs and stay compact in your hips; the steadiness in your base will translate into greater freedom in extending your spine as well as more latitude in opening your shoulders. A firm foundation will help you maintain your balance so that you can focus on the work in your upper body.

There's also a link between the stability of your foundation and the spaciousness in your torso—you're basically flavoring your forward bend with a backbending element when you strive for length along the front body. This is the union of opposites—the *yuj*, or yoke, which yoga teaches us to inhabit. ■

Natasha Rizopoulos lives and teaches yoga in Los Angeles and Boston.

backbend to forward bend

Parsvottanasana is a tremendous shoulder opener that challenges you to keep your chest open even as the arm position can make this very difficult. To get the most out of the pose, however, that is exactly what you want to do.

At YogaWorks, we've developed what we call the "shoulder girdle" mantra to describe the actions to take to keep your shoulders in alignment in this posture and many others. We call it a mantra because it is a series of instructions that, once learned and understood, can serve as guidelines to illuminate and transform your practice. Unlike a traditional mantra, it has no spiritual component—just a set of orienting principles that you can come back to again and again, especially when you find yourself at a loss about what you should be doing with your shoulders in a given posture.

The mantra is based on correct alignment in Tadasana (Mountain Pose) and can be applied to a multitude of poses. Play with it here in Parsvottanasana (Intense Side Stretch) as an opportunity to discover the backbending elements that make this forward bend so delicious, and then see what happens when you thread it through the rest of your practice. You may find it very useful!

"Extend your sternum away from your navel." This helps to create length along the front of your body, as in Upward Bow Pose.

"Spread across your collarbones." This establishes breadth across the front of your body, as in Low Cobra Pose.

"Draw the heads of your shoulders back to align with your side body." This keeps the pectoral area open and broad, as in Camel Pose.

"Soften your trapezius muscles, and release them down your back." This helps to prevent the buildup of tension in the upper back, as in Bridge Pose.

"Broaden your shoulder blades and move them into your chest." This opens the heart and supports the front of your body, as in Upward-Facing Dog Pose.

Online Extra

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